
Reader Response To “Metaphors”

I believe that most people think of their own life and life experiences in metaphor, which is why Plath’s poem, “Metaphors,” resonated with me to such a strong degree. In nine lines with nine syllables each, Plath captures both her feelings about and experiences with pregnancy in a way that reflects an honesty which may make some uncomfortable. She conjures not only the physical changes she experiences, but also some raw emotional moments as she considers the dramatic changes she will face on her journey to become a mother. The rhetorical situation of this poem effectively speaks to the wonders and anxieties of motherhood in a way that will be meaningful to many readers.

Context is important in literature when examining the rhetorical situation of a text. It is likely that Sylvia Plath wrote “Metaphors” prior to becoming a mother for the first time. The humorous imagery in the poem is juxtaposed to the more serious, and anxiety-ridden final three lines, which suggest that the narrator has some reservations about the inevitability of the impending birth. As a mother myself, I can relate to this two sided coin of experience. I remember feeling as though my body was not my own, that my life had become a secondary concern, and that in making the decision to have a baby, I selected an unalterable course. The context of this poem seems clearly grounded in the personal experience of the author.

Purpose is also critical to understanding the rhetorical situation of this poem. In my view, the purpose of this text is to describe the pregnancy of the narrator in a way that exposes both the awe inspired by creating another life and the trepidation of waiting on something to change. I vividly remember feeling like I was the only person who had ever experienced pregnancy when I was expecting my first child. I sense the same isolation from the narrator when I read this poem. The final three lines of the poem, which refer to the last three, difficult months of pregnancy, also inform my understanding of the author’s purpose. As I read, I am forced to confront the similarities of my own experience with that of the narrator, whose sense of inevitability and loss of control preoccupy her mind as reflected in the imagery used in these final lines. I am also left to wonder if the narrator of this poem wanted this pregnancy, which is a question I believe many readers will ask. It is difficult to tell if the narrator passively accepts this fate, but the humor of the initial imagery seems to imply that the narrator is not necessarily unhappy. The purpose of this poem may also be to explain and name the concerns of the narrator. Identifying feelings in words and imagery is one way that I use to manage my own fears and anxiety, and I sense something similar from the tone of the narrator in this poem.

Finally, a clear concept of intended audience is necessary to have a full understanding of “Metaphors.” While it is also impossible to know who Plath imagined would read this poem, it seems obvious that she expected other women to have some empathy for the experience described by the narrator. However, anyone who has ever seen or spoken to a woman expecting a child will recognize the imagery in this poem. Women often describe their growing bodies as feeling as large as a house or as having legs unable to support their ever-enlarging belly, and both of these images are available to the audience in this text. Since pregnancy and childbirth are commonplace in our society, I believe Plath expected her audience to recognize the riddle she describes in this poem. Connecting with the audience via shared experience or shared understanding implies that the author could recognize irony of feeling isolated and

alone. In fact, the choice to describe the feeling of boarding a train in the final line supports the idea that pregnancy and childbirth does not happen in isolation.

Responding to Plath's "Metaphors" is like participating in the human experience via poetry. Even readers who have not been pregnant or waited to become a mother have been connected to the birth experience in some way; therefore, the rhetorical situation of this poem is relevant because it is so clearly connected to each person's humanity. It is natural to ponder the awe inspiring ability to create life, just as it is natural to have concerns, worries, or fear about change. I believe readers of "Metaphors" will find meaning and connection to their own life experience in this poem.

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